War and the politics of identity in Ethiopia: the making of enemies and allies in the Horn of Africa, by Kjetil Tronvoll

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Abstract: Observers of the Horn of Africa are regularly puzzled by the often shifting alliances that materialize among regional power holders. While the dictum 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' is often cited as an explanation, War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia expounds the highly complex processes that determine the (un-)making of friends and foes. Drawing on fieldwork in the Tigrayan-speaking highlands of Ethiopia (and earlier research in Eritrea), Tronvoll scrutinizes the impacts of war on individual and collective identity formation in Tigray and, more broadly, Ethiopia. Most of the book's empirical data concern the dynamics and consequences of the devastating Ethiopian–Eritrean war of 1998–2000, which claimed an estimated 200,000 casualties. The author situates these events in the longue durée of the very close, but ambivalent relations between Tigrayans in Ethiopia and Tigrinya-speaking highland Eritreans (known as kebessa) who both inhabit the trans-Mereb area. Making use of Fredrik Barth's boundary concept, the author reviews 150 years of evolving enemy …

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The subsequent chapters on gender (Hassim) and the media (Duncan) address important issues that are often overlooked. Both are broadly positive in terms of improvements in gender equality and free and unbiased media coverage of the election respectively, while noting existing shortcomings. The final two chapters (Daniel and Southall, Daniel) note broad political developments and caution that while the 2009 elections were generally free and fair, concerns remain relating to media freedom, constitutional threats, and the need for the ANC to return power to Parliament from the presidency.

Several key themes emerge from the contributions – the potential dangers of a one-party dominant state, the need for increased accountability and transparency in politics, concerns over pressures placed upon democratic institutions, the consolidation of opposition and decline of the micro- and nano-parties, and uncertainty over the long-term consequences of COPE's emergence. At times, however, the collection suffers from repetition between chapters as many contributors note but do not develop the importance of particular events or influences (Zuma's corruption trial, the emergence of COPE). The inclusion of chapters on the media and on gender and politics are to be applauded. However, the lack of detailed engagement with the geographies of voting – in particular of rural–urban issues – is surprising. The importance attached to the youth vote is repeatedly noted, but a detailed engagement with this demographic is absent.

The rapidity with which the collection was published means the contributions are fresh and capture the debates of the moment of the election well. A longer period between the election and publication, however, could have allowed for more nuanced analysis and for reflection on certain of the more immediate outcomes of election. Overall, the collection does what it sets out to do and makes an admirable contribution to debates on South African elections and politics. The book adds commendably to the canon on electoral politics in South Africa and provides an accessible and informed entry into key political debates. It will be of great use to academics, university students, and other interested parties.

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War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia: The making of enemies and allies in the Horn of Africa, by Kjetil Tronvoll. New York, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2009. xiv + 239 pp. £40.00 (hardback). ISBN 978 1 84701 612 6.

Observers of the Horn of Africa are regularly puzzled by the often shifting alliances that materialize among regional power holders. While the dictum 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' is often cited as an explanation, *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia* expounds the highly complex processes that determine the (un-)making of friends and foes. Drawing on fieldwork in the Tigrayan-speaking highlands of Ethiopia (and earlier research in Eritrea), Tronvoll scrutinizes the impacts of war on individual and collective identity formation in Tigray and, more broadly, Ethiopia. Most of the book's empirical data concern the dynamics and consequences of the devastating Ethiopian–Eritrean war of 1998–2000, which claimed an estimated 200,000 casualties. The author situates these events in the *longue durée* of the very close, but ambivalent relations between Tigrayans in Ethiopia and Tigrinya-speaking highland Eritreans (known as *kebessa*) who both inhabit the trans-Mereb area. Making use of Fredrik Barth's

boundary concept, the author reviews 150 years of evolving enemy images in northern Ethiopia to explore how identity politics create distinction and enmity, but also connections and alliances.

The book's rich material and carefully elaborated argument can be summarized in four points. First, the author explains how enemies become friends and *vice versa* by redefining their relationships as a function of cultural relations and political differences. Eritrea, a former ally of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), turned into Ethiopia's nemesis after 1998 and had to witness how its neighbour deported its citizens. In the process the cross-boundary identity shared by Tigrinya-speaking Tigrayans and Eritreans 'was re-conceptualized by the war as a boundary of separation and dichtomization' (p. 167). In analogy, while the Tigrayan *weyane* rebellion of 1943 and the TPLF insurgency after 1975 conceived of the Amhara ruling class as a foe, the Amhara ethnic group was recast as a friend in the Ethiopian–Eritrean conflict.

Second, experiences of war and terror shape individual and collective identities of many Ethiopians. Hence, the creation of a 'Tigrayan ethno-political consciousness' (p. 93) was intrinsically linked to the TPLF's armed struggle against the former Derg regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Moreover, the Ethiopian–Eritrean conflict incited Tigrayans to reflect, rethink, and reposition their ethno-political identity in relation to the Eritrean and Ethiopian polities.

Third, enemy images are the product of overlapping and at times contradictory registers, historiographies and narratives. Tigrayan anger at the Eritrean invasion of Badme and other disputed territory resonated in cultural concepts related to land (*risti*), resilience (*habbo*) and revenge (*henay mifdai*), which were reactivated in the 1998–2000 confrontation. Concurrently, the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – which had for a long time challenged and even denied pan-Ethiopian nationalism – suddenly embraced a 'Greater Ethiopia' discourse to mobilize resources and fighters for the war effort, thereby 'using the very same symbols, the same history, and the same personalities as those who built the empire' (p. 152).

Fourth, political identities in Ethiopia and elsewhere are fragmented by history, conflict, ethnicity, and tensions between dominant and subaltern interpretations of self and significant others. As the author convincingly argues, competing and at times paradoxical enemy discourses are produced by different groups and their elites. Many Ethiopians celebrated 'Operation Sunset', during which Ethiopian troops recaptured Badme in May 2000. However, the EPRDF was unable to capitalize on these sentiments, as many criticized its leadership's kin-based relations with Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans. Overlapping enemy images that fashion current Ethiopian politics refer to the Derg, the Amharized Ethiopian state, Eritrea, and the incumbent government. They explain why 'Ethiopian nationalism today, thus, comes in the plural' (p. 207).

Two critiques need to be levelled against Tronvoll's volume. First, the author sets out to disprove 'cohesion theory' – the claim that intra-group cohesion is enhanced during conflict with other groups. Yet much of the author's analysis of the Ethiopian–Eritrean war could also be interpreted as corroboration, and not rejection, of this theory. Second, the book features extensive and fascinating interviews that illustrate how ordinary people and government officials perceive identity, politics, and war. Unfortunately, the reader is left in the dark whether these quotes are excerpts of recorded statements or transliterations by the author and his research assistant.

In conclusion, *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia* offers a methodical, original, and highly informed account of the contested political identities that have marked Africa's second most populous country in the past two decades. Tronvoll masterfully weaves past and present, local and national, individual and collective strategies of identification into an eloquent explanation of how enemies are (un-) made in different times and places. He succeeds in making sense of fluid and fragmentary identity discourses, which achieve a palpable quality in his writing. This book deserves the attention of all students of contemporary Ethiopian (and Eritrean) politics. Moreover, it provides critical insights for scholars interested in the ethnography of war, nationalism, and border studies in Africa.

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Understanding Somalia and Somaliland, by Ioan Lewis. London: Hurst and Co., 2008. xii + 139 pp. £16.00 (paperback). ISBN 978 1 85065 904 4.

Becoming Somaliland, by Mark Bradbury. Oxford: James Currey, 2008. xiv + 271 pp. £14.99 (paperback). ISBN 978 1 84701 310 1.

Somaliland provides a remarkable and mostly unreported contemporary example of nation building. A British colony that constituted an independent state for a week in 1960 before choosing to unite with a neighbouring ex-Italian colony to form a single Somali state, it more recently took advantage of the collapse of that state to renew its claim to statehood, declaring independence in May 1991. Even as costly international efforts to rebuild Somalia have entirely failed, the north-west area claimed by Somaliland has emerged as peaceful and prosperous, and the new state has been legitimated by several reasonably democratic elections and a relatively effective administration. This record has come even though Somaliland has received little aid from the international community, which continues to refuse to recognize its statehood.

These two timely books offer useful introductions to Somaliland. Lewis, a long-time observer of Somalia, has written a shorter and more pointed account of recent events, grounded in his deep knowledge of Somali culture and history. Avoiding the pitfalls, condescension, or over-complication of books by experts for a more general audience, this is a brief and readable introduction to all things Somalia and Somaliland. Lewis has drawn on his many years of research in the region and on his extensive back catalogue to write a book which is not only an excellent starting place for those new to this corner of Africa, but which also has insights for those with a longer acquaintance with Somalia and Somaliland.

A Pastoral Democracy (Oxford University Press, 1961), Lewis's most famous work, is often the first port of call for those wishing to grapple with the complexities of the Somali clan system. In the first section of *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland* Lewis gives a condensed overview of much more detailed work from his other books on the culture and organization of Somali society. Clannism and the clan system is a sensitive as well as an everyday element of politics, which is important in all parts of the country. Outside observers, however, sometimes regard it as an element that can be ignored. This can have catastrophic results for international policy towards Somalia, which has more often than not been characterized by a failure to understand the intricacies of Somali society and politics.